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Implicit communication in organisations

The impact of culture, structure and management practices on employee behaviour

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Keywords *Communication, Employees behaviour, Organizations*

Abstract *Organisations engage in explicit and intentional communication with employees in various ways. However, communication will not be received in a "neutral" context. Employees operate in an organisational (or behavioural) context determined by the organisational culture, structures and systems, and the management practices. This context acts as a source of implicit communication towards employees. This view fits the various perspectives about communication, which does not need to be considered as a two-way process, and which can be intentionally or unintentionally, transmitted and received. All too often, implicit communication is at odds with the "official" explicit communication. Through this latter form of communication the organisation might, for example, proclaim a quality image, while in reality employees experience that, in case of conflicts, delivery planning prevails over quality. Likewise, communication about the "learning organisation" appears to be cumbersome in a culture suppressing discussion about failures. The effect of implicit communication should not be underestimated. Cynicism among employees is repeatedly the result of inconsistent messages being received. This paper describes the aspects of organisational culture, structures and systems, and management practices, seen in a behavioural context, in order to illustrate how these aspects act as an implicit source of communication to employees. Additionally, this form of communication expresses whether employees themselves are seen as the crucial core of organisational success. The importance of consistent signals is illustrated, specifically with respect to organisational change programs.*

Introduction

Implicit communication

Organisational performance is for a large part determined by employee behaviour. This behaviour is of primary interest in communication activities. This communication has many facets, such as the source initiating communication, the medium used, and the target group that is to be affected. If communication is seen as more than merely transferring information, then it can be argued that communication aims ultimately to affect behaviour of those receiving the communication. Hence, in our further analysis, employee behaviour will be the core reference variable.

This paper argues that next to explicit and intentional forms of communication, also other, more implicit forms of communication exist. These other forms can be both intentional and unintentional. In the latter case, signals can be voiced which are in conflict with the "official", explicit communication. Not only the organisation transmits



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inconsistent signals, but also more fundamentally, the trustworthiness of the explicit communication is seriously jeopardised. Cynicism among employees is all too often the result. For example, the effect of communication about quality improvements will be limited if, in the case of a production disruption, the delivery planning frequently prevails at the expense of delivering quality. Further, referring to people in the annual report "as the greatest asset" makes little impression if employees experience that they are "the most expendable asset".

These examples suggest that official, explicit communication will not be received in a neutral context, but in a context that in and of itself affects behaviour. When perceiving communication from the perspective of affecting behaviour, implicit communication of the organisational (or behavioural) context concurs with this view, since, as will be illustrated, this context determines behaviour. This concurs with the observation of Ghoshal and Bartlett (1997, p. 173) stating that "in the end therefore, the power of the behavioural context lies in its impact on the behaviour of individual organisation members".

This paper will be structured as follows. First, the introductory section will link the notion of (implicit) communication to employee behaviour and the context that determines behaviour. Important relationships are positioned in a conceptual model. The elements of the model are subsequently discussed, and operationalized through characterising dimensions enabling analysis of the model. This analysis will be discussed, based on research in a large number of organisations regarding the relationships in the conceptual model. Implications for communication within organisations are finally addressed.

In our view, three organisational facets can describe the context that determines employee behaviour, they are:

- (1) The organisational culture.
- (2) The organisational structures and systems.
- (3) The management practices, giving the model shown in Figure 1.

We will discuss the three facets of the behavioural context from the perspective of their effect on employee behaviour. In other words, based on the perspective that the organisational (behavioural) context acts as a source of implicit communication, its effect will be argued with reference to employee behaviour (as the dependent variable), by contending a strong relationship between behaviour and the contextual

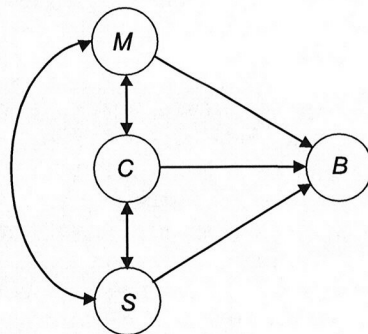


Figure 1.
The behavioural context
determining behaviour (B),
organisational culture (C),
management practices
(M), and organisational
structures and systems (S)

determinants. Illustrating that the three facets mentioned have a mutual relationship (as shown in Figure 1) will further emphasise their impact. In other words, they mutually affect the respective characteristics of the three contextual facets. Specifically with respect to organisational change, that might be the topic of explicit communication, it is of crucial importance to safeguard the consistency and coherence of the contextual facets (Hoogervorst, 1998). As Beer *et al.* (1990) observe, many change programs are fundamentally wrong, since they focus on the behaviour of employees directly, rather than on the conditions that determine behaviour. Hence, from this perspective, communication directly focused on behavioural change, for example in an attempt to evoke more customer and service oriented behaviours, seems fruitless if not supported by a similarly oriented behavioural context. Likewise, Ghoshal and Bartlett (1997, p.142) stress that "rather than focusing on changing individual behaviours, the more important challenge is to change that internal environment – what we call the behavioural context – that in turn influences people's behaviour".

The relationships identified in the model of Figure 1 were the object of research in a large sample of organisations, which will be briefly discussed later. The research confirmed the crucial importance of consistency between the three determinants of the behaviour context. In order to measure employee behaviour and the three behavioural determinants, characterising dimensions have been defined, which will be introduced later.

The fundamental dichotomy

An important aspect of implicit communication to employees, and manifest in the behavioural context, regards the importance of employees for organisational success. Two views on organisational and contextual conditions play a role, expressing a fundamental dichotomy about the view on employees.

The first view is eloquently illustrated by a large industrial organisation that received a new group of employees with the message that they were acquired the same way the organisation requisites sandpaper, and that they would be put back on the street whenever they were not needed anymore (Adler, 1993). This is clearly a vivid manifestation of explicit communication. Often, communication is implicit, but with a similar message, whereby the approach to people reveals the traditional view on the utilisation of human capacities: used in a limited, management-defined functional domain. Human labour in this view is required in so far as their tasks cannot be transferred to machines (Fromm, 1990). In line with the division between thinking and doing, as initiated by Taylor, this pure instrumental approach eliminates employees as a source for knowledge, ideas and meaningful contributions. Moreover, employees are seen rather as a threat to an efficient production process. Organisational performance is thus considered to be higher, the more employees behave according to formal structures, rules and tasks. Organisations operating in this "mechanistic" manner are characterised as machine bureaucracies (Mintzberg, 1989; Morgan, 1986).

Contrary to the mechanistic approach is the employee-centric vision. This vision goes deeper than the attention for social aspects in organisations as advocated by the human relations movement (Likert, 1965; McGregor, 1960). In addition to the belief in McGregor's Theory Y perspective which holds that employees are willing to work in a committed and motivated manner, the employee-centric vision is based on the

conviction that employees are the crucial core of organisational success. Drucker (1985) therefore advocates a shift in management attention, since in his view, aspects of employee behaviour should be the primary area of management focus. Adequate behaviour of employees is seen as the essential source for competitive advantage (Cooke, 1992; Csoka, 1994; Pfeffer, 1994). All too often however, this source is barely used. According to Prahalad (1995), human resources form the largest unused source for knowledge and skills in organisations. This is even more detrimental, since organisations are increasingly operating in a dynamic context whereby creativity and the self-organising capacity of employees are important. Additionally, empirical evidence supports the view of employees as an important source for organisational success (Pfeffer, 1994). Research among a large number of organisations, identified employees as the only permanent source for competitive advantage (Csoka, 1994). Other studies about successful organisations provide similar conclusions. Not the possession of patents, a unique technology, or the execution of a brilliant strategy determined the essence of competitive advantage, but the characteristics of human resource management (Collins and Porras, 1994; Pfeffer, 1994).

We believe that these two visions about the importance of employees for the success of the organisation will be manifested in the organisational culture, structures and systems, and the management practices. As such, the organisation communicates implicitly to employees what it really means about their importance. Official, explicit messages carrying a different meaning will be experienced as untrustworthy.

Employee behavioural dimensions. The research presented in this paper is based on the conceptual model displayed in Figure 1. In this model, employee behaviour is the dependent variable. Overall, the selection of dimensions for employee behaviour was driven by the conviction that employees form the crucial core of organisational success. More specifically, the dimensions were based on the analysis of a number of domains where organisations need to be successful. These domains are: *productivity, quality, and customer and service orientation*, as the more output oriented domains, and *organisational control, organisational learning and innovation, and human resources management*, as the more internally oriented domains. The following five behavioural characteristics, or dimensions, were selected, which are relevant in the context described above.

An essential underlying element regarding these common characteristics is employee self-initiated behaviour, hence the ability to undertake action. Given increased business dynamics, this aspect is evidently relevant with respect to continuous improvement in the areas of productivity, quality, service and customer orientation. Continuous improvement requires behaviour directed towards removing errors and increasing performance. The dimension *achievement* (b_1) characterises behaviour directed at reaching goals. Hence, the dimension expresses a desire to achieve, and a drive to accomplish (Moss Kanter, 1983). Others similarly refer to being performance driven, or showing an "entrepreneurial attitude" (Leonard-Barton, 1992). Improvement for a large part rests on employee creativity and the generation of new ideas, as expressed by the dimension *creativity* (b_2). Inspiring individual initiative and creativity in employees is considered a core organisational capability, whereby pockets of entrepreneurial activities are leveraged through an integrated process of organisational learning (Ghoshal and Bartlett, 1997). The dimension characterises behaviour of employees regarding ideas and solutions to solve work related problems

or improve processes. Hence, the dimension expresses the ability to think, and reflects the spirit of innovation. Creativity is further required to address organisational contingencies, thus to deal with uncertainty and unpredictability (Easterby-Smith, 1990). Self-renewal and -organising is viewed as crucial for organisational continuity and dealing with complexity. A heuristic learning process aids the process of self-renewal and -organising. In this respect, the dimension *open-mindedness* (b_3) expresses employee behaviour reflecting an openness to change (Armstrong, 1992). Others speak of responsiveness to the need for change or employee flexibility (Drucker, 1985). Numerous authors have addressed the issue of employee involvement and participation both from an organisational performance perspective (Dean and Bowen, 1994; Deming, 1986; Heskett *et al.*, 1990; Juran, 1991; Schneider and Bowen, 1993), and from a human resource perspective (McGregor, 1960; Likert, 1965; Sashkin, 1989). Participation is conditional for dedication, loyalty, ownership and for self-development. Hence, the dimension *participation* (b_4) expresses behaviour that shows involvement with, and integration into, the organisation. Finally, in line with the end-to-end integrated process orientation, quality, service and customer orientation require an end result and goals related to behavioural focus. Contrary to departmentalism (Moss Kanter, 1983), behaviour should thus reflect a clear sense of the organisational purpose and mission (Juran, 1991). As the fifth and final characteristic therefore, the dimension *mission-attitude* (b_5) expresses behaviour directed to the organisational end-product, and aligned with the organisational purpose and mission.

Implicit communication and the organisational context

Three organisational aspects have been identified above that determine the context from which implicit communication to employees is transmitted. These aspects will be briefly discussed in order to understand their influence on employee behaviour.

Organisational culture

Background. It has been argued that broad attention for organisational culture resulted from a threefold crisis that was felt in the 1980s regarding certain organisational aspects (Dahler-Larsen, 1994). The first crisis was due to worsening competitive position as experienced by western companies. Based on the comparison with successful (Japanese) companies, many studies postulated a relationship between cultural aspects and organisational performance (Denison, 1990; Gordon and DiTomaso, 1992; Kotter and Heskett, 1992).

The second crisis was felt in the area of organisational theory, since its traditional content could not explain adequately the phenomena contributing to the aforementioned crisis. Contenders of the cultural vision stressed the untenability of the mechanistic approach, seen from the perspective of the complexity of organisations (Daft and Weick, 1994). Aspects such as "shared values and meaning" among organisational members were seen as important for understanding the performance and motivational issues. These shared values and meaning will also be developed within the pattern of implicit communication.

Third, a societal crisis was argued to play a role (Dahler-Larsen, 1994). Organisations, seen as abstract and complex techno-economic entities, were considered as merely alienating, without providing or supporting the social orientation implicit in human nature. Alienation manifests itself in various ways,

such as the disappearance of the relationship between human individuals and the product of their labour or the disappearance of relationships between humans individually resulting from impersonal bureaucratic structures and task division. The organisational culture was seen as a means to counteract these developments through the creation of social integration and value patterns, which on the one hand serve as behavioural guidance, and on the other hand reduce the distance between personal activities and the organisational goals and mission.

As with the general notion of culture, also a multitude of definitions exists for the concept of organisational culture (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Hofstede, 1986; Schein, 1985). Some included behaviour in the definition, while others differentiated between culture and behaviour. The "behavioural approach" focuses on aspects such as rites and ceremonies, and fits the descriptive approach to culture, showing more attention for manifestations of culture, and addresses culture on the level of *form* (Trice and Beyer, 1984). Culture is thus seen as something the organisation *is* (Meyerson and Martin, 1994; Morgan, 1986). On the other hand, the "cognitive approach" differentiates culture from behaviour, whereby culture is seen as a collection of normative convictions that acts rather as guidance for behaviour. Various authors support this normative view, focused on the *content* of culture (Hofstede, 1986; Schein, 1985). Culture is then viewed as something the organisation *has*. From this perspective, culture refers to basic values and beliefs, resulting from learned responses of group members to environmental conditions and stimuli. Further, culture is considered a relatively stable phenomenon that is preserved even if group members change. Organisations therefore have a "cognitive" system and memory, since as Weick (1994, p. 72) observes, "individuals may come and go, but organisations preserve knowledge, behaviours, mental maps, norms and values over time". With the words of Durkheim, one can speak of a "collective conscience" (Hassard, 1993). Consciousness is essential for the capacity of self-organisation (Wheatley, 1994). Both form and content of culture act as implicit communicators to employees. Form can be manifested in different ways, such as through the arrangement of the work environment, but also through symbols, rites and ceremonies. Content refers to value and normative patterns, for example regarding quality, customer and service orientation or the view on employees as the crucial source for organisational success.

The importance of culture in organisations. Generally, the importance of culture in organisations has to do with the fact that values, norms and beliefs in a normative sense act as behavioural guidance. Culture operates as a "social control system" (O'Reilly, 1989). In other words, culture communicates how things ought to be, and defines the "unwritten rules of the game" (Scott-Morgan, 1994). Organisational culture can support or frustrate organisational goals. When employees are treated as resources, acquired similarly as sandpaper in the example given earlier, then a value pattern will be developed accordingly. Low commitment will probably be the result of the message that this value pattern communicates.

However, based on the view that culture is something that the organisation has, and thus in principle can be changed, the organisation can create a culture supporting employee commitment. Various authors indicate that next to the learning process through social interaction, (top) management activities offer important impulses for initiating culture change (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Peters and Waterman, 1982). This points to the symbolic aspect of management that influences beliefs and values of

employees (Bolmann and Deal, 1994). Schein (1985) considers the creation and management of culture, the only thing of real importance to leaders. Cultural change implies therefore that the organisation is implicitly communicating to employees through a different pattern of norms and values. From the perspective of culture as behavioural guidance, cultural characteristics should be, or become such that desired behaviour is developed and maintained. As such, culture can act as an aggregated form of behavioural regulation, and can replace some of the traditional mechanistic structures of control (Koopman, 1991).

Behavioural regulation is an important aspect of culture. This importance is of considerable significance in view of the continuously present unpredictability and uncertainty that is connected to complexity. Unlike the mechanistic view suggests, much of the organisational context and reality are unpredictable, ambiguous, and chaotic. Organisations can be described as chaotic systems (Stacey, 1992; Vinten, 1992). Such systems appear to have a principle or condition that allows them to develop an orderly pattern over time. Hence, "fluctuations, randomness, and unpredictability at a local level, in the presence of guiding or self-referential principles cohere over time into definite and predictable form" (Wheatley, 1994, p. 133). In organisations, these principles or conditions giving order can be identified as the normative and value pattern of culture. Despite the complex ranges of roles, tasks and contextual variance, when observed over time, "there is consistency and predictability to the quality of behaviour". How one should act, for example in a specific service encounter, is uncertain and unpredictable. However, the value pattern about service guides the required behaviour into an orderly and predictable fashion. In this sense, culture implicitly communicates what is considered important, and acts as a source for uncertainty reduction (Deal and Kennedy, 1982). Local freedom and autonomy are essential conditions for creating order. Values about taking initiative and exploring ideas are important, also from the perspective of organisational learning.

Traditionally, formalisation is used in an attempt to create order. Paradoxically enough, this principle of control often increases complexity and disorder rather than the opposite. According to Handy (1995), this paradox creates a self-destructive tendency, since the resulting role oriented value pattern will make organisations less responsive and capable of dealing with changing environments. This destructive tendency emerges because of "confusing control with order" (Wheatley, 1994). Moreover, in this way the organisation communicates that order can be obtained only through rules and procedures, not through employees.

It is important to note that the "bandwidth" of uncertainty offers possibilities for employee self-development. Under the label "mutuality", the situation is identified whereby personal and organisational goals are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Armstrong, 1992). Precisely at the level of self-management and self-organisation, conditions for mutuality and self-development can be created. Here, normative and value patterns reflecting the crucial importance of employees for organisational success play an important role. These patterns should also reflect the organisational purpose and mission, such that meaninglessness and alienation can be avoided by reducing the distance between personal activities and the organisational end-product and goals (Handy, 1995). Unlike the automobile factory that voiced to employees that the business was not about making cars, but making profit, it can be appreciated that

culture could create coherence, whereby activities also correspond with a personally felt goal (Wheatley, 1994).

Dimensions of organisational culture. Earlier we portrayed culture as a broad multidimensional concept that entails multiple perspectives. Therefore, the manner by which this concept is operationalised depends on the chosen perspective. Various authors have provided cultural dimensions based on deep-seated convictions about, for example, human nature or the nature about reality and truth (Hofstede, 1991; Schein, 1985). These aspects refer to fundamental cultural facets, but are, in our opinion, difficult to practically apply within an organisational context. We follow Wilkins and Ouchi (1983) who argue that since only part of human life coincides with organisational life, convictions pertinent to the organisation "are neither as deep nor as immutable as the anthropological metaphor would suggest". Various researchers therefore propagate a practical approach to the concept of culture in organisations (Reichers and Schneider, 1990). The culture dimensions chosen are based on this practical approach.

As identified earlier, service and quality (and the associated aspects of reliability and safety) have to do with the quality of work. The first dimension *excellence* (c_1) represents the aggregation of these aspects, and refers to convictions, norms and values regarding excellent work performance. This aspect is viewed as important for effectively working in teams (Katzenbach and Smith, 1994). Adler (1993) describes a dramatic organisational transformation that successfully tapped into employee "desire for excellence".

The importance of employee initiated behaviour has been mentioned with respect to quality improvement, service, productivity and organisational control. From this perspective, the second dimension *encouragement* (c_2) characterises values and norms about putting ideas into action. This refers to an "experimental mindset" that supports the try-out of ideas, hence an action orientation (Nevis *et al.*, 1995).

The third dimension *adaptability* (c_3) describes convictions regarding the necessity to change and adaptation to changing external conditions (Powell, 1995).

The expected advantage of an employee-centric view is a central theme in this paper. Such focus requires a different pattern of norms and values than those associated with the traditional mechanistic vision. These values are expressed by the dimension *people orientation* (c_4).

Finally, the fifth dimension *direction* (c_5) expresses the focus on the organisational end product or service and the associated goals and mission.

Organisational structures and systems

Appreciably, organisational structures and systems are the core elements of traditional thinking about organisations. Within this perspective, organisational effectiveness is considered depending upon the proper structures and systems, which should be the primary area of concern (Robbins, 1990). We will not specifically distinguish between the terms structure and system, and consider both to refer to an identifiable, bounded set of methodically interrelated elements or principles with some intended purpose. Various structures and systems can be identified, such as a communication structure, an appraisal and reward system, a hierarchical structure, the work and task structure, an accounting system, or a management information system, to name a few. In the true mechanistic sense, structures and systems are regulating mechanisms. They form the

formal system of control that embodies knowledge and principles for governance, and represent the embedded system of management in an organisation.

The influence and importance of structures and systems can hardly be overstated. If organisational goals are not embedded into formal structures and systems, then most likely these goals will not be realised. Structures and systems should therefore match with the organisational mission, vision, values and goals. In that case, structures and systems become, in the words of Selznick, the "institutional embodiment of purpose" (Burns, 1979). As a consequence, various structures and systems should be mutually consistent, legible and coherent, such that they signal the same implicit and explicit message (Hosking and Morley, 1991). Coherence therefore relates to the internal logic of related aspects.

Lack of coherence and consistency. Consistent implicit communication requires coherence and consistency among the various structures and systems, hence "structural conflict" should be avoided (Fritz, 1996). Reality shows however that this requirement is often violated with unfortunate consequences. Structures and systems are developed independently, leading to mismatches with the intentions of other structure or systems, or even with the organisational intentions as a whole. All too often, mismatches will become manifested in the future or in another part of the organisation (Senge, 1990). For example, we might think of a system geared to lower inventory costs. This might lead to longer ordering times, in turn leading to lower customer satisfaction, as measured in another system. Subsequent damage may be larger than the short-term inventory cost savings. Thinking along similar lines, customer satisfaction regarding the timely delivery of parcels will be negatively affected if the operational system is using truck load factor as the primary optimisation variable. Further, in the area of payment systems, specific performance related rewards might lead to a strong narrow task or departmental focus, whereby the total organisational process is frustrated and the end-quality degraded. The acquisition of unworkable orders because payment is contingent upon sale volume, is a well-known example. Deming (1986) labelled the reward structures as a "deadly disease". Also, process improvements as defined within a quality system might fail due to departmentally oriented accounting and management information structures. Likewise, the needed long-term horizon within a quality system cannot be maintained as a result of short-term financial reporting structures. Various authors have mentioned this aspect as an impediment to building necessary competences in organisations (Deming, 1986; Prahalad and Hamel, 1990). The examples mentioned could be complemented with multiple additional ones, such as striving for teamwork in improvement programs, while rewards structures are focused on individuals. Or the necessity for more customer service is communicated, whereas the primary performance measurement appears to be the number of customers served per hour. In all these examples, structures and systems are sending inconsistent signals to employees.

Noticeably, the realisation of internal consistency is not a simple matter, also because of the increasing possibility of inconsistency with increasing complexity. There is no simple recipe to avoid inconsistency, other than a continuous awareness about the messages that different implicit sources of communication are transmitting. This must be a primary area of management attention.

Complex, adaptive interrelationships. The examples given above show a basic pattern: the internal dynamics of one system or structure can bring forward undesirable consequences that are manifested in other structures or systems. Frequently, one might speak of "goal replacement", whereby sub-goals are replacing the original goals, and means become goals in themselves (Kerr, 1989).

As indicated earlier, the pattern of dynamic interrelation leads to the situation that effects will become manifested elsewhere. Conversely, this implies that problems that become manifested within a certain structure or system do not necessarily have to be rectified within that same domain. Managerial awareness of this interrelation between systems may enable "double-loop" learning that, unlike "single-loop" learning is not directly focused on symptoms, but on underlying patterns causing the symptoms (Argyris and Schön, 1978). For example, lack of teamwork might not be solved through additional behavioural training, but could be resolved through modifying the individual focus of the reward structure.

As shown, mismatches can seriously jeopardise organisational performance, or even become manifested in alarming forms. An example of the latter is given by an airline which, although communicating the importance of safety, used a performance related reward system that withheld payment if flights were not flown according to schedule, such as due to diversion, return or cancellation (Phillips and McKenna, 1996). This structure communicates the implicit message that punctuality goes above safety. Operational safety problems can thus be the result of production or performance related reward structures that force equipment utilisation beyond safety or maintenance limits. Remedying increased failure or safety incident rates in this case should come from a focus on the payment structure, rather than from a focus on the maintenance or technology domain. Understanding the dynamic interrelation is a fundamental condition for organisational learning (Senge, 1990). This capacity enables continuous self-diagnosis of the organisation, and enables subsequent change. Both capacity to learn and understanding of the dynamic interrelation are therefore the primary conditions for organisational change. These conditions create "double-loop" learning as mentioned earlier. Prahalad and Hamel (1990) identified this type of learning as an organisational core competence. In view of this article, double-loop learning therefore deals with recognising the implicit message being communicated.

As might be appreciated, structures and systems represent an important embedded power in organisations, keeping organisational members captive in the associated referential framework. Structures and systems can thus be viewed as the embedded form of implicit communication. In this sense, structures and systems can contribute to distorted or incorrect communication about organisational affairs, leading to incorrect decision-making and frustrate the realisation of organisational goals. A broad spectrum of structures and systems has been discussed elsewhere, seen from the perspective of their influence on employee behaviour (Hoogervorst, 1998).

Dimensions for organisational structures and systems. The approach in characterising structures and systems has been based on the perspective of their influence on employee behaviour. Hence, the dimensions selected do not intend to measure specific structures and systems, but do address more generic characteristics.

The first dimension *admission* (s_1) expresses the opposite of the mechanistic approach, and refers to the level of employee freedom offered by structures and systems by the performing jobs. With reference to the remarks made earlier, this deals

with the possibility of employee self-initiated behaviour. Evidently, the importance of the social system can only materialise if the competence of employees is developed and maintained. So, the second dimension *development* (s_2) refers to the level by which structures and systems utilise, require, and develop employee capacities. This links back to the employee-centric vision on organising, mentioned earlier. Further, structures and systems have been identified as the embedded principles for management and control. As such, they are the embodiment of organisational inertia. The third dimension *stimulation* (s_3) refers to this aspect, and characterises in an opposite sense, the ability of structures and systems to stimulate responsiveness and agility.

The importance of mutual consistency and coherence of structures and systems has been also emphasised. Through the dimension *coherence* (s_4) this organisational aspect is expressed. Finally, mismatched conditions were described whereby goal replacements are introduced that jeopardise the realisation of organisational goals. The final dimension *orientation* (s_5) characterises the alignment of structures and systems with the organisational end-product and service, and the associated goals and mission.

Management practices

Traditional perspective. Within the traditional scope, management is primarily concerned with (personnel) planning, budgeting and the creation of formal structures and systems that define the machine-like rules of the organisational "system" (Kotter, 1988; Mintzberg, 1989). The more the employees behave according to the formal rules, the better the organisational performance is assumed to be. In view of our discussion about structures and systems earlier, important management tasks regard establishing coherence and consistency among structures and systems, since mismatches seriously jeopardise organisational performance.

In addition to the well-known works of Taylor, Fayol and Weber, Barnard (1938) contributed to the traditional thinking about management. He regarded positions as linking pins in a hierarchical structure with the purpose of structuring communication, the passing of orders, securing the contributions of employees, and the translation of general goals into specific tasks. The traditional perspective defines management in the context of defined communication channels, detailed role description, and authoritative management styles (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1969). Within this perspective, management clearly communicates implicitly its prerogative about thinking and decision-making activities.

Leadership. Different modes of implicit communication to employees play a role when management activities are observed from the perspective of leadership. As Burns (1979) notes, leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomenon on earth. Hence, various definitions of leadership exist. Next to technology, leadership is seen as an important factor determining future prosperity (Kotter, 1988). Conversely, lack of leadership is considered as a danger that could destroy society (Bennis, 1989).

Two important – not necessarily mutually exclusive – forms of leadership can be identified: *transactional* and *transformational* leadership (Burns, 1979). In the case of transactional leadership, the interaction between leader and followers is based on the exchange of valued things, as described by the economic transaction theory. No shared goal is required, while the mutual stimulation is limited, simple and restricted by the

elements of transaction, such as monetary reward in exchange for labour. Essentially, the transactional relation addresses employee self-interests (Yukl, 2002). Unintentionally, it is implicitly communicated that work is a sacrifice and an obligation, only to be conducted based on some transactional exchange.

Although the term leadership is used in the transactional sense, we will reserve this label for its transformational meaning. In this case, a more complex, deeper and mutually stimulating relation with followers exists, which is directed to a common goal (Burns, 1979). This relation concerns and affects the motivation of followers, based on mutual needs, expectations and values. Values are considered crucial, implying moral leadership to be a facet of leadership. Equally important is stimulating self-confidence and self-efficacy of followers, which in turn leads to self-actualisation. Fundamentally, this type of stimulation requires trust and integrity as its basis. As Bennis (1989) notes "leadership without mutual trust is a contradiction". Empathy, seen as the capacity to identify oneself with the situation, feelings and motives of others, is considered essential for the possibility to create trust, and the ability to motivate people (Bennis, 1989; Burns, 1979; Kets de Vries, 1994; Zaleznik, 1992). According to Yukl (2002), empathy has consistently shown to be important for managerial effectiveness. This is an important aspect regarding the emergence of leadership, whereby the leader also implicitly communicates the interests of followers. As can be appreciated, bureaucracy, with its advocated impersonal relationships, principally excludes the possibility of leadership.

In line with the reflection given in the above, leadership can be described as "inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and motivations – the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations – *of both leaders and followers*" (Burns, 1979). Others speak about "the process of moving a group (or groups) in some direction by mostly non-coercive means" (Kotter, 1988). Core to this process is the existence of a shared goal and vision, fuelling creative energy for action (Bennis, 1989; Kets de Vries, 1994; Rost and Smith, 1992).

The mutual relation between leader and followers implies that leadership develops in the context of social interaction (Burns, 1979). Leadership results in a dialectic sense through a process of reciprocal social relations (Hosking and Morley, 1991; Smircich and Morgan, 1982). Understanding leadership requires understanding of the context in which leadership develops (Whipp and Pettigrew, 1993).

Leadership or management? The question of whether leadership and management are different phenomena does not seem an issue of much debate. Roughly spoken, leadership has to do with influence and authority following from the relationship with followers. This relationship gives energy, direction and action. Management on the other hand deals with control, based on function-based authority. Evidently, fundamentally different implicit communication is associated with these two perspectives. As said, leadership deals with goals, values and the associated changes, while management is geared towards coordination, control and predictability. In the first case there is shared creation resulting from jointly supported goals and aspirations, whereas in the latter case only shared activities exist based on transactional relationships. Leadership appears to be meaningless within the instrumental and mechanistic perspective.

Shared goals of leader and followers are pursued in a context characterised earlier by the continuous presence of uncertainty and unpredictability. Within such a context, mutual trust is essential, which the instrumental relationship is incapable of bringing

about. According to Zaleznik (1992), the crucial difference between leaders and managers has to do with the conceptions they have about order and chaos. Leaders tolerate and can deal with the absence of structure and the presence of uncertainty and unpredictability (Bennis, 1989; Luthans, 1992; Zaleznik, 1992). Leaders are persistent and consistent, "knowing" that fundamental uncertainty and unpredictability cannot be avoided, but communicate nonetheless faith towards followers. Further, there is congruence between convictions, communication, goals and actions. Congruence implicitly communicates the seriousness of vision, goals and values, and the necessity to act accordingly.

Are leaders or managers needed? The foregoing sketch about the differences between leadership and management suggests that leadership in organisations is of more importance than management. According to Bennis (1989), organisations are often "over-managed but under-led". Effective management in this vision factually implies the expression of leadership. Although no generally accepted criteria for effective management appear to exist, it seems reasonable to assume that effectiveness in any case includes that work is carried out with high standards for performance, together with employee commitment and satisfaction (Luthans, 1992; Yukl, 2002). Research confirms the human-centred approach as the most important contribution to effective management (Luthans, 1992). Comparable results are found regarding charismatic leadership (Bass, 1985). Although the human-centred approach manifests itself differently in different situations, the approach itself is considered not to be situation dependent, but rather is based on an organisational philosophy that considers employees as crucial for organisational success. In view of the discussion, it is emphasised that this choice implies a shift from management towards leadership, since involvement, participation and commitment require more than just a transactional relationship, but a relationship based on shared goals, values and aspirations. This shift additionally implies a direction and focus towards the social aspects of organising (Drucker, 1985; Leavitt, 1989; Tsoukas, 1994).

Leadership in the sense expressed here is relevant not only upper hierarchical functions, but also to every level in the organisation. Indeed, every level requires a stimulating relationship with employees, and a translation of organisational goals into local goals and aspirations. Implicit communication should be consistent in this respect. Precisely these aspects are often lacking at all organisational levels (Tichy and Ulrich, 1989). As Kotter observes, leadership at middle and lower levels might be less formidable, but is certainly not less important or fundamentally different. This leadership with a "small L" is therefore of "incredible importance" (Kotter, 1988). Doz and Thanheiser (1993) have commented similarly, and stress the importance of transformational leadership at every level in the organisation.

Dimensions for management practices. In the light of our previous discussion about management, dimensions for management practices were chosen from the perspective of transformational leadership.

Freedom and autonomy have been mentioned as important aspects for the creation of overall order, as well as the ability to create possibilities for employee self-development. From the management side, said freedom and autonomy has to be offered, as expressed by the dimension *enablement* (m_1). As said, the core of leadership has to do with the relationship with followers. Empathy has been mentioned as a characteristic of employee focus. We will express that characteristic through the

dimension *consideration* (m_2), referring to management practices that show care for, and interest in employees (Luthans, 1992).

The third dimension *integration* (m_3) deals with establishing participation, involvement and commitment of employees. This integrative function is conditional for creating employee loyalty (Lammers, 1987). Further, leadership has been connected to trust and integrity. This refers to the alignment of articulated beliefs and practices visible in behaviour. No alignment in this respect reduces participation and commitment, and can even lead to indifference or cynicism (Mirvis and Kanter, 1991). The fourth dimension *consistency* (m_4) expresses management practices regarding "walk the talk". Finally, the importance of direction has been argued in view of local freedom and autonomy. The last dimension *guidance* (m_5) expresses management practices relative to directing employees towards the organisational purpose and goals, pertinent to customers and the organisational end-product or service.

The alignment of organisational forces

Organisational culture, organisational structures and systems, and management practices have been discussed above as three elements of the organisational context from which implicit communication to employees emanates, thereby subsequently determining the behaviour of employees. In the case of structures and systems, the danger of mismatches has been illustrated, leading to transmitting inconsistent messages. Evidently, the requirement for alignment similarly holds for organisational culture, management practices, and structures and systems mutually. They should be mutually supportive, in order not to send inconsistent messages to employees, as emphasised earlier. Inconsistency might easily lead to low commitment or even cynicism about organisational intentions. In line with the examples given above, multiple examples can additionally be given. It is not to be expected that quality teams will be successful if the existing culture suppresses an open discussion about failures, or when management frustrates improvement suggestions because of their perceived prerogative of decision-making. Similarly, an information system for sharing knowledge seems of little value in a culture reflecting an individualistic and competitive working environment.

Specifically with respect to change of programs, consistent messages seem crucial. The notion of alignment and matched conditions is no novelty, and has been addressed by various authors in a more or less comparable manner. Peters and Waterman (1982) use the 7S-model and stress the importance of coherence between strategy, structure, skills, systems, style, shared values and staff. Miles and Snow (1984) discuss the strategic fit between management processes and the organisational structure. The MIT framework for organisational change shows a comparable picture. Besides technology, structure, management processes, individuals and roles are identified as areas of mutual influence that should be aligned (Scott Morton, 1991). With respect to re-engineering, Hammer and Champy (1993) similarly identify jobs and structures, management and measuring systems, and values and beliefs, as important mutually related aspects. According to Pettigrew (1998), research clearly shows the relationship between segmentation and incoherence on the one hand, and organisational inertia on the other hand, while conversely, the capacity to change relates to organisational integration and coherence. Lawrence and Lorsch (1969) discuss the importance of internal "organisational fit" and Fritz (1996) discusses avoiding "structural conflict".

According to the "congruence theorem", the higher the degree of fit – or congruence among the various components of the behavioural context – the more effective the organisation becomes (Nadler and Tushman, 1997).

Numerous examples of failed change programs demonstrate the importance of coherence (Beer *et al.*, 1990; Clement, 1994; Kaufman, 1992; Kotter, 1995; Lund and Thomson, 1994; Numerof and Abrams, 1994; Zairi, 1994). Failures showed singular activities being initiated without alignment with other factors determining employee behaviour. For example, attempting to change culture through training and communication, while existing management practices and structures and systems remain unchanged (Burack, 1991). A renewal process can therefore only be successful under conditions of consistency and continuity of concepts (Doz and Thanheiser, 1993). These conditions are evidently manifested through patterns of consistent implicit communication.

Mutual dependence. The emphasis placed on the mutual alignment of the organisational macro variables that determine employee behaviour is based on the assumption that these variables are mutually related in a dynamic relationship, as shown in the model of Figure 1. Consequently, after some time an "equilibrium situation" will exist whereby the various variables show comparable characteristics. So, bureaucratic structures and systems will eventually lead to bureaucratic management practices and vice versa, and will also show a related culture. The mutual relationship exists since the relationship between people and contexts is one of mutual creation. Put differently, people are both "products of their contexts and participants in the shaping of those contexts" (Hosking and Morley, 1991, p. 7). No "neutral" form of participation is possible as a result of the interdependence between "how things appear and the environment which causes them to appear" (Wheatley, 1994, p. 63).

Various writers have drawn attention to the three possible forms of interdependencies. Meyerson and Martin (1994) observe that structure is both a manifestation and a constraint to the development of cultural values. Further, management behaviour has been argued to depend on value patterns (Alvesson, 1992; Hellgrin and Melin, 1993; Meyerson and Martin, 1994). Comparably, Dutton and Penner (1993, p. 105) identify a "strong link between an organisation's belief system and the routines, programs or structures that perpetuate it". Structures and systems have a direct influence on the behaviour of management. This results not only from the fact that structures and systems represent the embodied principles of control, but also because they present the assumed organisational reality to which management responds (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994; Johnson and Kaplan, 1987; Kaufman, 1992; Prichard, 1992).

Coherent and consistent communication from the organisational context therefore requires attention to those aspects that constitute the context. The expected relationship between behaviour and organisational culture, management practices, and organisational structures and systems – as the behavioural determinants – were tested in a research project conducted in a large number of organisations.

Research design

Development of the measuring instrument

As illustrated, for all four variables, employee behaviour and the three contextual drivers, five characterising dimensions have been chosen. They offer the possibility to

investigate the relationship between behaviour and the contextual drivers, as well as between these drivers mutually. The measurement instruments developed were tested in a pilot study, which enabled the definite design of the instrument used in the research.

For measuring dimensions, the questionnaire method has been selected, using the summation or Likert scale. A linear combination of answers to questionnaire items belonging to a certain dimension, determines the respondent's position regarding that dimension. Averaging the individual responses within a certain organisational unit for a particular dimension offers the possibility to obtain a reliable unit characteristic for that dimension. This process was performed for all 20 dimensions. The level of analysis is thus the organisational unit, such as a maintenance or administrative unit. Individual responses appear to be more reliable if self-reporting does not imply self-diagnoses (Nunnally, 1969). Respondents are thus asked about their perceptions regarding the dimensions to be measured.

Since the reliability of measuring scales hardly improves with more than seven scale steps, while further respondents have difficulties differentiating between more than seven alternative answers, the questionnaire used seven-response categories. Scales that refer to agree/disagree indications were used, since they are more easily handled and interpreted by respondents (Nunnally, 1969; Kidder, 1989). Moreover, aspects such as culture, and structures and systems can be more easily measured through these scale anchors. In our case, the seven-scale anchors ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

We have extensively described the process for obtaining a reliable questionnaire elsewhere (Hoogervorst, 1998). Essentially, through a number of phases (including the pilot study), the initial set of 422 items was reduced to 125 items. The quality of the definite item set was assessed through: the coefficient for reliability (α), the average inter-item correlation (\bar{r}), and the average item-rest correlation ($\bar{r}_{i,r}$). For the definite item set, the following figures were obtained: $0.79 \leq \alpha \leq 0.96$, with $0.43 \leq \bar{r} \leq 0.80$ and $0.57 \leq r_{i,r} \leq 0.86$.

Data of the pilot study further enabled to determine the number of required respondents per organisational unit for the final research, given a desired level of measurement reliability. Two approaches for assessing this reliability were used, one based on the average correlation between respondents, and the other based on the analysis of variance within and between organisational units (Hoogervorst, 1998). Using a minimal level of reliability of 0.85, both approaches indicated that 12 respondents per organisational unit should be used.

As overall reliability indicators, the coefficient α as defined by Cronbach (Nunnally, 1969), and ρ as defined by Winer (Winer *et al.*, 1991) were used. The organisational sample data resulted in the following figures: $0.73 \leq \alpha \leq 0.91$ and $0.63 \leq \rho \leq 0.80$. These figures indicate an adequate level of reliability.

The measuring of organisations

A large number of organisations was approached for participation in the research. They were operating in four sectors: *industry, service, non-profit*, and *government*. Ultimately, the returned questionnaires of 75 units appeared to be suitable for subsequent analysis. Participating units were informed about their score on the dimensions, as well as their relative position in the total sample. Figure 2 shows an

example of the way organisations were informed about their scores and the relative position in the total sample. To aid simple interpretation, scores were scaled to levels between 0 and 100. The double line indicates the unit score. For example, the unit score for the dimension *integration* is 38. The thin line between the double line refers to the minimum, average, and maximum value found in the sample of 75 units. In this example, the minimum unit score in the total sample is 28, the average score 59 (border between dark and light part of the thin line), and the maximum score 82.

Some important results

Data obtained from the measurement of 75 organisational units enable the investigation of the relationships shown in the conceptual model in Figure 1. Specifically, answers are provided regarding the hypothesised strong relationship between behaviour and the behaviour context, as well as between the elements of this context mutually. Given the theme of this article, we will illustrate some main results supporting the notion of the behaviour context as a strong source for implicit communication.

Sector differences. As indicated above, the 75 organisational units were operating within four sectors: *industry*, *service*, *non-profit*, and *government*, with the majority in the first two sectors. For a number of dimensions, significant differences existed between sectors. Those dimensions are shown in Table I.

The analysis (*F*-test) showed that the sectors *industry* and *service* scored better than the *non-profit* and *government* sectors. The first two sectors appear to have a stronger mission and goal direction, as indicated through the higher score for the dimensions *b*₅, *c*₅ and *s*₅, whereby a remarkable difference is visible for the cultural dimensions *c*₃ and

Figure 2.
Example of reporting to
organisations

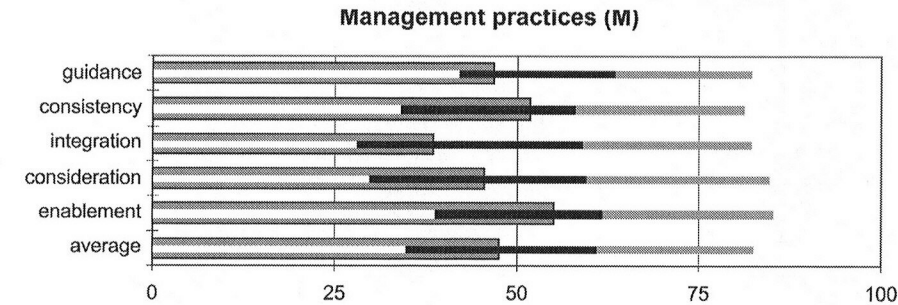


Table I.
Result of variance
analysis for the different
sectors

Dimension	<i>F</i>	Prob. > <i>F</i>
<i>b</i> ₂ creativity	2.45	0.070
<i>b</i> ₅ mission attitude	2.30	0.084
<i>c</i> ₃ adaptability	5.20	0.003
<i>c</i> ₅ direction	4.76	0.004
<i>s</i> ₄ coherence	2.36	0.076
<i>s</i> ₅ orientation	3.31	0.025

c_5 . The level of adaptability appears to be also a significant cultural difference between the two groups, with better scores for *industry* and *service*.

Relationships between dimensions. Based on 20 dimensions, a total of 190 possible relationships between dimensions can be identified. Various measures exist to identify the strength of the relationships, such as in the form of correlations. We will not present these correlations in full extent, but show the strength of the relationships through graphical representation. Higher correlation means smaller graphical distance. These distances however require a 19-dimensional space for visualisation. Fortunately, the multi-dimensional scaling technique offers a possibility to arrange the original distances proportionally in a two-dimensional space. The level by which the latter representation adequately represents the original distances is expressed by the so-called "stress" parameter. A good representation requires this parameter to be ≤ 0.15 (Kachigan, 1986). The actual value found was 0.068, so the picture given below provides an adequate representation about the dimensional distances, hence about the strength of the relationships.

When studying Figure 3, the strong relationship between human-focused dimensions such as *people orientation* (c_4), *enablement* (m_1), *consideration* (m_2), *integration* (m_3), and *development* (s_2) is remarkable. These dimensions are also strongly connected with uniformity in behaviour and beliefs of management, as indicated by the dimension *consistency* (m_4).

The cultural dimensions *excellence* (c_1), *encouragement* (c_2) and *adaptability* (c_3) have the smallest distance with behavioural dimensions. This seems understandable, since those cultural dimensions express values about quality of work, the need to put ideas into action, and the necessity to adapt.

Apart from the structural dimension *development* (s_2), which refers to the level by which structures and systems are directed towards the utilization and development of employee capacities, and the dimension *orientation* (s_5), which expresses the orientation towards the organisational end-product, goals and mission, other structural dimension appear to have larger distances with behavioural dimensions. Interesting is

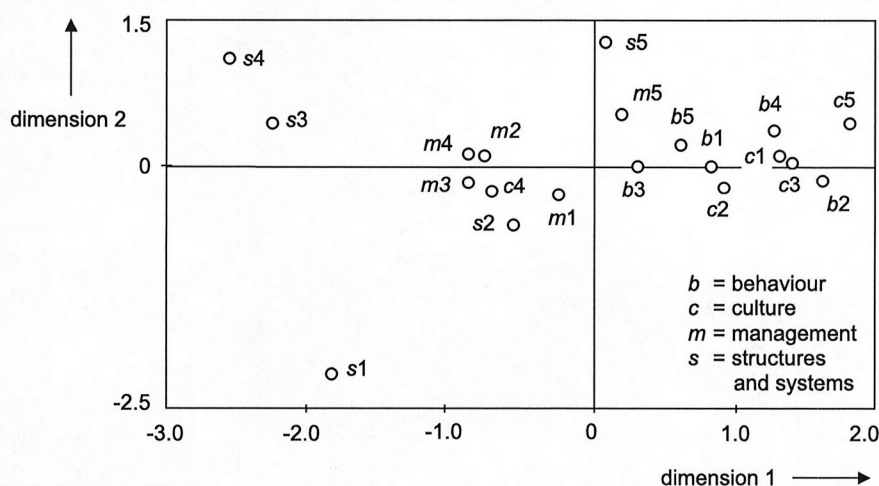


Figure 3.
Distances between
dimensions

the relatively small distance between the dimensions *stimulation* (s_3) and *coherence* (s_4). In the perception of employees, absence of inertia induced by structures and systems is related to their mutual coherence.

Finally, the dimension *admission* (s_1) appears to have little relationships with other dimensions. An explanation might be that less freedom in performing tasks not necessarily entails less favourable behavioural characteristics, since work-related processes and regulations might be determined by, or in cooperation with employees, while conversely, less formalisation not necessarily relates to more employee initiated behaviour.

Relationships in the sample of organisational units. When averaging the unit scores for all five dimensions of the main macro variables, respectively, a unit score for main macro variables is obtained. Figure 4 gives a graphical representation of the relationships between these main variables, with B for the average behavioural scores, and C , M , and S the average of the scores for organisational culture, management practices, and organisational structures and systems, respectively.

The 75 points in the diagrams of Figure 4 illustrate the interrelationships between behaviour and the behavioural context, as discussed earlier. Also these diagrams show that behavioural cores strongly relate with scores about culture, management practices, and structures and systems. The relationship between behaviour and culture turns out to be the strongest. This picture is also supported by the (canonical) correlations found.

Homogeneity within units. Homogeneity within units refers to the level of comparable scoring of respondents pertinent to the variables of the behavioural context. The standard deviation can be considered as a measure uniformity of perception among respondents. Per organisational unit, this standard deviation has been determined for scores on the 15 dimensions that define the behavioural context, as given by 12 respondents (180 observations in total). Recalling B as the average of behavioural scores per unit, this value can be correlated (over 75 units) with the standard deviation s of the scores on the behavioural context. This correlation turns out to be $r(s, B) = -0.4204$ with $p = 0.0002$ the level of significance. Clearly, this correlation shows that higher scores on behavioural dimensions are associated with more uniformity and coherence among respondents about the behavioural context. This seems to suggest that units with more favourable employee behaviour

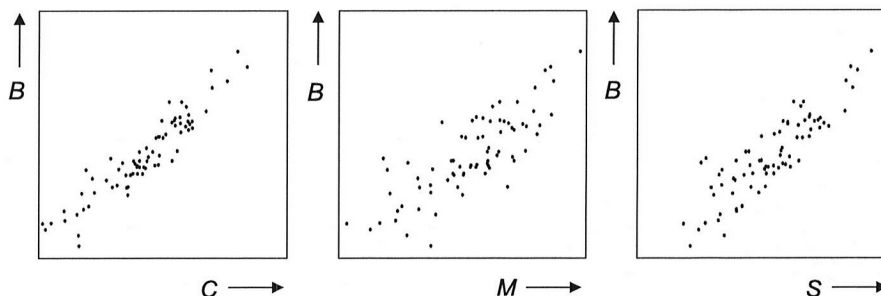


Figure 4.
Graphical representation
of relationships between
main variables

characteristics show more consistence and coherence regarding the behavioural determinants, and conversely. Put differently, more favourable behavioural scores are associated with a more consistent level of implicit communication from the behavioural context.

Implications for communication practices

Communication can be viewed from various angles. These might include psychological or group dynamical characteristics of actors in the communication process (Verckens, 1992), or the difference between intentional and unintentional transmission and reception of communication (Fauconnier, 1997). Generally, multiple facets of communication play a role simultaneously. This paper paid attention to implicit communication, in contrast to explicit communication, whereby the influence of the organisational (behavioural) context has been stressed. It is therefore important to ensure consistency between explicit and implicit communication. As argued, this requires specific attention to the behavioural context. The said context has been investigated based on a number of dimensions that characterise the context. Strong relationships were found, specifically regarding the human-centred dimensions mutually, as well as regarding cultural dimensions in relation to behavioural dimensions. Also the relationship between behaviour and respondent homogeneity within the units surveyed is indicative. As said, more favourable behavioural scores are thus associated with more consistency of the behavioural context's implicit communication.

The results found confirm the importance of consistency in communication. For instance, the strong relationship between human-centred dimensions shows that explicit communication about employees as the most important "asset" seems not fruitful if the organisation scores low relative to these dimensions. Likewise, given the close relationship between culture and behaviour, explicit communication that calls for quality and service oriented behaviour will have little effect if the existing culture is not similarly supportive. Finally, explicit and intentional communication might be used during organisational transformation. However, inconsistency with what the behavioural context implicitly transmits creates a high likelihood of organisational inertia. As remarked earlier, renewal and change are only successful under consistency of concepts and activities (Doz and Thanheiser, 1993). Organisational integration and coherence are thus related to the ability to change (Pettigrew, 1998). From this viewpoint it is therefore stressed that integration, consistency and coherence are also manifested in communication, both intentional (explicit), and unintentional (implicit).

Based on the argued importance of consistent communication, the findings of this study support the notion that the behaviour context – viewed as a powerful source of implicit communication – must be taken into account in order to safeguard consistency. Without such a perspective, organisations are sentenced to "communicative myopia".

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